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# The Mastery of Power

(The Secret of Attainment)

BY

REV. THOMAS VAN NESS

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(THE SECRET OF ATTAINMENT)

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## THE MASTERY OF POWER.

Let man have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.—GEN. 1:26.

Possibly many of us are acquainted with the juvenile rhymes that tell of the little boy who wishes he were a sea pirate, an Indian, a soldier, prize fighter, or some one else equally forceful and terrible.

About three years ago I brought home from England a superbly illustrated book of the Lives of the Saints to my own small son. It awakened in him but a languid interest. He listened to the reading of one of the biographies but after that the book was put on the shelf. On the other hand his well worn copy of Grimm's Household Tales is very greatly treasured. He delights to hear, day after day, of the wonderful exploits of certain magicians and fairies, for their marvellous power over wind and water and land and hidden treasures fascinates his imagination.

Watch a number of boys at play. At first it is an imitation of horse and driver; each boy wishes to be the driver, to tame the wild horse, or it is the coming of the fire engines or by and by the lurking red men with their blood-curdling war whoops, or the battle between the Knights of Chivalry or a mimic war between Spaniard and American.

Parents are often discouraged or alarmed to see cropping out in their mild-faced boy of seven or eight strong admirations for buccaneers, prize fighters, base ball champions and savages, but there is really no cause

for the mother to feel alarmed if she but stop to consider what it is which holds enthralled the admiration of her child. It is not the love of blood or pain or mere brutality, which attracts him, but it is the evidence of power, the free, untrammelled course, the open manifestation, of physical activity.

The love for energy, forceful action, is one of the deepest instincts in humanity. It is the splendid display of strength in action, of physical vigor, in the pirate, in the soldier, in the Indian, I repeat, which holds enthralled the admiration of the small boy. It is this which he desires to imitate.

This desire to exercise power, to wield influence, to give expression to inner impulses, is the very sentiment which in later life perhaps will manifest itself in business enterprises, in the putting forth of the strength of will along commercial lines, and in the taming of Nature's gigantic forces, such as steam, dynamite, electricity.

I remember standing one day on the top of a spur or foothill of the Rocky Mountains and looking down over the Boulder Valley and the great tawny plains that stretched interminably eastward. Now and again along one of the roads could be seen, crawling like small insects, farm teams, cattle tenders on horseback, or pedestrians. How insignificant, how powerless, how almost contemptible in his littleness appeared man from this distance, especially when compared to the great natural forces all around me. Yonder was the roaring, rushing stream, bearing on its surface heavy logs and pieces of timber; near by were the jagged granite cliffs that had stood for ages, and beyond, the vast stretches of mesa and open plain, the same yesterday, today, perhaps forever. Yes, superficially contrasted, man was as nothing to his environment and yet, yet,

stored up in him, hidden away in the gray matter of his brain, pulsing along the nerves of his body, was a force, an energy immeasurably greater than all the forces around me, a power that in a few years afterwards was to change the appearance of those desert-like plains, to make wheat wave, trees to grow, fruits to blossom; a force that was to master the force in the mountain stream, turning the waters now this way, now that way; a force that defied the eternal hills and shattered the granite rocks, a force that burrowed right through the mountain's sides, swinging steel bands across chasms and passing beyond the highest peaks in steam-propelled cars, though wind, rain, snow and avalanche, all combined to impede the way and place insurmountable obstacles in the path.

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I can imagine, some 3000 years ago, the Norseman sitting disconsolately on a jutting rock overlooking the wild and tempestuous sea; his flint arrows and bow of ash had failed to bring down game; his crude attempts to grow barley and rye had also failed by reason of frost and sudden storm; his wife and children were shivering, starving for want of clothing and food. Only from the ocean on that cold and icy February day might he hope to pull forth food to stay his own deep hunger and appease that of his family. Is it strange that he supposed himself to be surrounded by wicked trolls and fierce ice giants? Is it a matter of wonder that he thought the forces of nature dominated him, like mocking, cruel demons? What was he? a mere waif, a temporary plaything in the hands of those powerful forces. As with Hiawatha,

"In his heart was deadly sorrow,  
In his face a stony firmness,  
On his brow the sweat of anguish."

He, too, perhaps, sent forth his cry for help to some Gitchie Manito, to some mighty spirit asking in that bitter hour of hunger for food, food for his children, for himself, food for his starving, dying wife. And as with Hiawatha,

“Through those far resounding forests,  
Through the forests vast and vacant,  
Rang that cry of desolation;  
But there came no other answer  
Than the echo of his crying,  
Than the echo of the woodlands  
And the roaring of the deep sea.”

Suppose at that moment the personification of Father Odin had appeared before him and said, “I have heard your heart cry, I know your deep sorrow, I understand what is your dearest wish, but why do you call on me? South of you in sunny Italy there is delicious fruit and warmth. East of you in the Mesopotamian valley there is corn and wine and oil. Yes, there you will find a land flowing with milk and honey. Supply yourself then from these inexhaustible stores.”

“You tell me who am half famished,” the Norseman might have replied, that “far away in the south-land food is to be had in abundance, but how am I to go there? Between me and the things I so greatly covet is this vast waste of waters, like an impassable gulf to my hot desires. How can I reach that land of milk and honey in Asia when there are miles of waste land, woods and desert stretching between here and there.”

“Believe me,” Father Odin might have replied, “the sea presents no obstacle; for you can safely sail upon it; the woods are no barrier, for through them as over the waste lands you may pass with quickness and with safety.”

“Do not so mock me,” the Norseman might make quick rejoinder. “Yes, if I had the wings of the bird



it is true I might fly across the land ; if I had the fins of a fish, it is true I could pass through the seas, but unassisted, without wings or fins, without power to do or become, what am I but a wretched, helpless mortal? I am doomed by fate to struggle for a little while against powers greater than I and then miserably die."

"But there is a power," Father Odin might have declared, "which will speed your arrow unerringly so that the strong bear and the swift eagle will fall when you shoot; there is a power that can bring heat out of yonder coal field, and lift for you these mighty stones so that you may build a building which shall be impervious to wind and snow, to frost and cold; there is a power that can invoke from the heavens the very lightning to light your pathway at night, to grind your corn, and to propel you rapidly across the land. By means of that same power you can talk to others who are miles away and even cross the tempestuous seas in perfect safety."

"Oh, tell me, tell me, the name of that power," our Norseman might have exclaimed. "What god or demon is it, that to him I can offer sacrifices and prayers and obtain in return a share of his almighty force?"

"That power to do all these things and more equally wonderful," the earth-wanderer might have said, "*is within yourself*. You, O man, are stronger far than the Trolls, mightier than the Ice Giants, more god-like than all those in heavenly Valhalla. Call on that inner power to do and to become, and behold ! all earth and sea and sky shall obey your command and be subject to your will."

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When at the World's Fair in Chicago, some few years ago, nothing in the manufacturers' building so took hold of my interest as the long line of ship-models

which gave in miniature the evolution of the boat from the rough canoe up to the present palace-like steamship, Kaiser Wilhelm.

The longing in the Norseman's heart for fertile lands and sunlight, and trees that bear all manner of fruit—for an earthly Valhalla—makes him think of the possibility of attaining, through human means, his heart's desire. By and by he fashions a rough boat that slowly and laboriously he can push through the water. The first step taken, others follow. Patiently, bit by bit, improvements are made. In time larger and more complicated grows the vessel; oars give way to sails, and sails to steam, as a method of propulsion, and now men need no more envy the ability of the fishes, for in one of these mighty modern steamships, the ocean can be crossed in less time even than it takes the fish to travel.

So, too, upon the land the problem of transportation has been solved. Here in the United States the fruit of California and Georgia does not ripen and decay on the trees for want of means to transport it to the great centres of population; the magnificent wheat fields of Minnesota and Dakota are not useless because there is no way to get grain to market. The inventive, god-given faculty of man, his application, his industry, has brought forth the steam horse which on its steel roadway travels a continent faster far than can the strongest bird.

The Heavenly Father then did not give his children at creation fins like those of a fish, or wings like those of a bird. He gave them something better, creative intelligence. He made them sharers with himself of the divine omnipotence. Through and by means of that inner divine force which makes us indeed sons of God, it is possible, as the writer of Genesis says, for

us to have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

Is it only over physical forces, only over the fowls of the air and the cattle of the earth that we have dominion? Have we no control over ourselves? over our mental and spiritual nature, over our destiny? Are we predestined to a certain fate, to the development of a certain type of character whether we will or no?

"The war god took possession of me and I smote him hip and thigh."

"A divine frenzy seized upon me so that I was not accountable for what I did."

So the ancient Greeks excused themselves for their vengeful and passionate deeds, but is it a fact? Must Macbeth murder the king? Is he driven on by a blind necessity to do a deed he loathes? Are some men marked for disaster by a fate outside themselves? Is *Œdipus* bound to be the victim of a tragedy which wrecks his life though he be innocent of any desire to do wrong? "What could I do? The luck was all against me." Is this a fair statement of fact? Again I ask, have we dominion over the forces of wind and wave, of earth and sky, and no capacity to rule ourselves, to shape our own future?

What a mockery it would be if we could change everything except ourselves? What a travesty on freedom if we have no freedom to influence or modify the conditions about us.

"It matters not," says the poet, "how straight the gate, how narrow the way,

"I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul."

The poet tells us aright. I am the captain of my soul. You are the master of your fate. If you and I fail it is because we do not summon to our aid the force that is ours, that resides not in heaven or hell, and can be invoked neither by angels nor devils, but the power that resides within ourselves, to be invoked by our own wills. If we can achieve dominion over the things about us, if we can make the sun paint our photographs, steam propel our engines, electricity light our houses, then surely we can achieve large dominion over our thoughts, over our emotions, our passions, and thus, indirectly, over our bodies. You and I have much to say as to whether we shall be heavy-limbed, awkward, dyspeptic, gouty, red-faced, blear-eyed, or the reverse.

“Lincoln was the homeliest, most uncouth youth in all Kentucky.”

“Lincoln was the most interesting, the most sympathetic, the most magnetic man who ever sat in the President’s chair.”

I take these two phrases from speeches made on Lincoln’s birthday. What changed the appearance, the facial expression, the very disposition, one might almost say, of this raw-limbed, ugly youth? The power within. A power which is yours and mine, as it was Lincoln’s. Ah! the trouble is with you and with me that we do not fully believe we can achieve, and so we fail of our highest destiny. Our theology, our current literature is responsible for this underestimation of ourselves and our ability to do and to become.

Oh, to be nothing, nothing,

Only to lie at his feet,

A broken and emptied vessel

For the master’s use made meet.



So rings forth the evangelical song sung by ten thousand young Christian Endeavor voices. Every line of that hymn is an insult and a cheat. It is pernicious from one end of it to the other. The master does not want us to lie at his feet as an Asiatic despot demands of his slaves, nor would he consider us of any value if we were broken and emptied vessels. That is the very way in which we would not be made meet for his use.

Our own dear Longfellow is responsible for almost as fatalistic a doctrine in his poem, *Keramos* :

“Turn, turn my wheel, this earthen jar  
A touch can make, a touch can mar.  
And shall it to the Potter say,  
What makest thou? Thou hast no hand?  
As men who think to understand  
A world by their Creator planned,  
Who wiser is than they.”

And why should not men think to understand this world by their Creator planned? That is the Creator's wish that men should understand. That is why they are given creative intelligence. Only by understanding can they appreciate the wisdom of the Almighty. If my child does not understand what I am doing then how can he judge whether I am doing a wise or a foolish thing?

If you cannot grasp intelligently the object of God's laws, then how can you tell whether they are beneficent or the reverse? Tennyson's theology is better :

“Turn wheel with smile or frown.  
With that wild wheel we go not up nor down,  
For man is man and master of his fate.”

I commenced my discourse by saying that the love of power is instinctive, and the desire to put it forth, to exercise influence, is well nigh universal, hence your boy loves to read about those who were strong and forceful and in his games he enjoys being masterful. This is the secret of why rich men continue to become

richer. They tell you truly when they say they do not care for the luxuries which money will buy. Philip II, with the gold and silver of the new world at his command, lived like a monk. The bed chamber and dressing room of Czar Nicholas I, as I saw them in St. Petersburg, were more plainly furnished than the most ordinary servant's room here in Boston. What Philip II did care for, though, was power over states and nations. What Nicholas I supremely enjoyed was his ability to wield an autocrat's sceptre. What Jay Gould cared for above all else was the influence which his wealth gave in railroad circles, in financial centres, at Albany, at Washington. This desire to wield power is right and legitimate, but what I do wish you to realize is that it is far nobler to wield power over self than over things. Within you there is a whole vast realm to conquer and to rule over. The old Jewish author spoke the truth, "Greater is he that ruleth his own spirit than he that conquereth a city."

Are you able to rule yourself?

Yes, you are able to rule yourself. You have within you abilities, talents that are seldom brought to the surface simply because you have not dreamed of their existence. They are there, nevertheless, awaiting simply the word of command to start into activity.

One of the surprises which greets us now and again is the revelation of exceptional energy or ability in some one supposedly ordinary and commonplace.

There arises a national crisis, and a silent, plain-faced man of Galena, Ill., astonishes the country by his wonderful military talents; a war breaks out with Spain, and an obscure army surgeon, a medical graduate, exhibits at Santiago and afterwards at Havana administrative talent of the highest order; a fire is discovered in a New York tenement and an ignorant Irish servant

girl imperils her life and displays heroic qualities which make Bridget Fanning's name worthy to rank among the immortals; a Baptist clergyman, considered by his neighbors an ordinary preacher and thinker, in a moment of patriotic impulse sits down and writes a hymn which becomes the national hymn of America; Count Tolstoi is twice at death's door, he is given up by all the leading physicians, yet he rises from his sick bed and takes up his literary work because, as he says, he must live in order to complete the task which God has given him to do.

In Tolstoi, in Smith, in Bridget Fanning, in Wood, in Grant, something was not suddenly interjected in them which made them heroic, administrative, poetic, and the like. No; it was simply the disclosure to themselves, to the world, of something which all along had been concealed, dormant, which perhaps never would have sprung into activity had it not been for some great excitement, enthusiasm, or personal need.

Within you, dormant, unsuspected perhaps, are all of these qualities. You do not realize that they are there because you have not tried to put them forth, but you can, if you will, be equally strong, poetic, heroic. You can, if you will, even as did Count Tolstoi, put forth a latent strength, an unexpected vitality, which shall conquer weakness and lassitude, and the many enemies of flesh and blood.

Awake, then, to a knowledge of your power. Even as Odin might have called on the Norseman to make real his longings through and by means of his creative intelligence, so I, a son of God, call on you who are sons and daughters of God to make real your longings, to rise out of depression and passivity, into hopefulness and activity. I call on you, I command you, to arise from the dead and to join the living, to

separate yourself from that which is merely material and temporal and join yourself to that which is spiritual and eternal.

The Master, more true to the facts of life than was ever ancient Greek dramatist or modern hymn writer, because he lived more fully in his God-given nature, did not make the mistake of comparing man to a passive potter's vessel, shaped or broken by the active hand of circumstances; he did not say that man, like the elements, was driven now hither, now yon, as were *Œdipus* and *Orestes*, by a blind necessity. No; he compared man to a seed, to a life force. There it is in the ground. Shall it lie there, shall it be absorbed among the elements of earth, or shall it take from those very elements of earth what it needs, and come forth into the light, drawing from the sun, from the very rains and snows, from the tempestuous winds, from the atmosphere, the needed sustenance, shaping to itself a stalk, a form, a body, and crowning all with the full bloom, the sheaf, the blossom, the perfect flower. Perfect, did I say? Yes, perfect. It is possible, so daring, so mighty, so confident is the tone of the Master; it is possible not only to have dominion over all the things of Nature, over all the fishes of the sea, of the fowls of the air, of the creeping things of earth, but more, it is possible in spirit to rise to the Divine.

*"Be ye perfect even as your Heavenly Father is perfect."*

Shall we try to obey that command?





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